



Sophie Cousens

THIS TIME NEXT YEAR

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About the Author

Sophie Cousens worked in TV in London for over twelve years, producing

The Graham Norton Show, Big Brother and Ant and Dec. She now lives in Jersey and balances her writing career with working for an arts charity and

taking care of her two small children. *This Time Next Year* is her first novel.

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Sophie Cousens worked in TV in London for over twelve years, producing

The Graham Norton Show, Big Brother and Ant and Dec. She now lives in Jersey and balances her writing career with working for an arts charity and

taking care of her two small children. *This Time Next Year* is her first novel.

To dear Aunty Em, who would have loved to read this

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New Year's Eve 2019

The Night Jam was rammed. Pounding music pulsed through the club and

the walls felt sticky with sweat, alcohol and likely worse. Minnie held tightly to Greg's hand as they jostled through the crowd near the door.

‘We’re never going to get to the bar,’ Greg shouted back to her.

‘What?’ Minnie yelled back, her ears adjusting to the heavy bass.

‘We won’t be able to get a drink before midnight. I don’t even know where Lucy’s party is,’ said Greg.

He pointed upwards, indicating they should try to push their way upstairs to the terrace on the mezzanine above. Minnie looked at her watch – it was ten to

midnight. So far, this whole evening was only validating her hatred of New Year’s Eve. Why hadn’t she stayed at home and gone to bed early? Then she

remembered that her heating had been cut off – she’d come out to keep warm.

And Greg had been determined to go to his work friend’s party; she would have

felt like a bad girlfriend if she’d made him go alone.

Minnie let herself be dragged through the throng of pulsating bodies. Finally,

they emerged from the crush, stepping out into the cool night air where the thumping bass from the club settled to a more manageable decibel.

‘Watch it!’ Greg said, pushing a drunk guy out of his way. Greg glared at the

man, trying to make him notice he’d spilt his beer on someone, but the man was

too far gone to care.

‘I did warn you about spending New Year with me,’ said Minnie.

‘Will you stop with this jinxed stuff?’ said Greg, shaking his head.

‘Honestly, it’s a thing; bad things happen to me at New Year’s. I wouldn’t be

surprised if this whole building went up in flames before the night’s out. Or perhaps a very small asteroid lands right where I’m standing.’

‘I don’t think we’re having a terrible night because you’re jinxed; I think we’re having a terrible night because you dragged us to dinner at weird Alan’s

house on the other side of the galaxy. Now we’re arriving at a party two seconds to midnight when everyone’s high on moon juice and ... come in Star

Command?’ Greg lifted a finger to his ear, pausing to listen to an imaginary transmission, ‘Mission control says we’re not even at the right party.’

‘Permission to abort the mission?’ Minnie asked hopefully.

‘Denied,’ said Greg.

‘Denied,’ said Greg.

Minnie and Greg had been dating for five months. They’d met at a march

outside City Hall, protesting the lack of affordable housing in London. Greg was the journalist covering the story and Minnie was there supporting Mrs Melvin, a lady she had been delivering food to since the early days of her business. Minnie and her friend Leila had made a sign for the march that said, ‘HOUSING IS A

HUMAN RIGHT', but they'd used too much paint on the first 'H' so it looked a

The Night Jam was rammed. Pounding music pulsed through the club and bit like an 'M'. On the march, Minnie, Leila and Mrs Melvin found themselves

the walls felt sticky with sweat, alcohol and likely worse. Minnie held tightly to walking next to a group of people dressed as large cats wearing monocles and Greg's hand as they jostled through the crowd near the door.

top hats. One wore a T-shirt that said, 'SAY NO TO THE FAT CATS!' Greg 'We're never going to get to the bar,' Greg shouted back to her.

ran over to take a photo of Minnie's sign with the fat cats in the foreground. He

'What?' Minnie yelled back, her ears adjusting to the heavy bass.

shook his head laughing as he snapped away.

'We won't be able to get a drink before midnight. I don't even know where

'Why are you laughing?' Minnie shouted crossly.

Lucy's party is,' said Greg.

'Maybe the cats are so fat because of all the mousing?' Greg said, pointing to

He pointed upwards, indicating they should try to push their way upstairs to her sign. Leila looked and laughed. Minnie rolled her eyes.

the terrace on the mezzanine above. Minnie looked at her watch – it was ten to

'It doesn't say mousing,' she said, hand firmly on her hip.

midnight. So far, this whole evening was only validating her hatred of New

‘It does look like it says mousing, Minnie,’ said Leila.

Year’s Eve. Why hadn’t she stayed at home and gone to bed early? Then she

‘Minnie Mouse, this photo will make a great front page,’ said Greg with a sly

remembered that her heating had been cut off – she’d come out to keep warm.

smile.

And Greg had been determined to go to his work friend’s party; she would have

‘You’d better not,’ said Minnie, trying not to laugh as she chased him down felt like a bad girlfriend if she’d made him go alone.

the street, playfully prodding him with her sign. Minnie liked men who could

Minnie let herself be dragged through the throng of pulsating bodies. Finally, make her laugh. She was instantly drawn to Greg’s sarcastic manner and his they emerged from the crush, stepping out into the cool night air where the

angular features. He had a neatly trimmed brown beard and distinctive, dark-

thumping bass from the club settled to a more manageable decibel.

rimmed glasses. Once they started dating, Minnie discovered that it wasn’t just

‘Watch it!’ Greg said, pushing a drunk guy out of his way. Greg glared at the for work that Greg liked to make up headlines – he enjoyed captioning everything she did. When Minnie tripped on a step he would say, ‘Stunner trips

on stairs – Stairs seek legal advice; chances are they’re going down!’ Or when

‘I did warn you about spending New Year with me,’ said Minnie.

she took the last banana in his fruit bowl, he’d pipe up in an American drawl,

‘Will you stop with this jinxed stuff?’ said Greg, shaking his head.

‘Fruit bowl homicide still unsolved – Did victim go bananas? Cross the lime? Or

‘Honestly, it’s a thing; bad things happen to me at New Year’s. I wouldn’t bewas it simply a case of sour grapes?’ Puns were his thing. Greg wasn’t making surprised if this whole building went up in flames before the night’s out. Or

any jokes this evening.

perhaps a very small asteroid lands right where I’m standing.’

‘Look, you stay here,’ he said with a sigh, looking around the balcony, ‘I’ll

‘I don’t think we’re having a terrible night because you’re jinxed; I think go back through and try to find this private room.’

we’re having a terrible night because you dragged us to dinner at weird Alan’s

‘OK, well, if an asteroid lands in your absence. I can only say goodbye, I

house on the other side of the galaxy. Now we're arriving at a party two seconds told you so, and Happy New Year,' Minnie replied, trying to sound upbeat.

to midnight when everyone's high on moon juice and ... come in Star

As Greg walked away, Minnie turned to look out at the London skyline and

Command?' Greg lifted a finger to his ear, pausing to listen to an imaginary

shivered. The city exuded a sense of serenity in sharp contrast to the atmosphere transmission, 'Mission control says we're not even at the right party.'

of the club. The buildings were bathed in silver moonlight and the night sky was

'Permission to abort the mission?' Minnie asked hopefully.

still and cloudless. Minnie wished she could transport herself to the top of

'Denied,' said Greg.

another empty skyscraper just to lie down on the flat roof and gaze up at the

'Denied,' said Greg.

another empty skyscraper just to lie down on the flat roof and gaze up at the stars, unfettered by other people.

outside City Hall, protesting the lack of affordable housing in London. Greg was

'Ten, nine, eight ... ' People were starting the countdown. 'Seven, six, five

... ' Minnie looked at all the couples pulling together in anticipation of the

lady she had been delivering food to since the early days of her business. Minnie midnight kiss. She was glad Greg wasn't there to kiss her. She never understood why the end of the year had to be marked with the ridiculous convention of

everyone locking lips in unison. People behaving like lemmings, following the

herd. 'Four, three, two, one, HAPPY NEW YEAR!'

An explosion of fireworks erupted in the sky, illuminating the city beneath in

a shower of multicoloured lights. Huge bursts of energy ignited in the darkness, miniature universes flaring into existence only to fade to extinction moments

later. Minnie wondered at all that effort for such a fleeting display of brilliance.

'Why are you laughing?' Minnie shouted crossly.

The city buildings below looked still and stately, unmoved by the frenzy of

'Maybe the cats are so fat because of all the mousing?' Greg said, pointing to activity above them. On the balcony of the club, the fireworks cast ugly shadows her sign. Leila looked and laughed. Minnie rolled her eyes.

onto the spaced-out faces of intoxicated people, as they swayed and swerved

'It doesn't say mousing,' she said, hand firmly on her hip.

through the crowd. Light shone into grimy corners, full of cigarette butts and

'It does look like it says mousing, Minnie,' said Leila.

discarded plastic glasses. A group of girls tottering about in high heels pushed

‘Minnie Mouse, this photo will make a great front page,’ said Greg with a sly smile into her and Minnie had to grab the railing to stay upright.

smile.

‘Happy Birthday to me,’ Minnie said quietly to herself. Then she felt a

‘You’d better not,’ said Minnie, trying not to laugh as she chased him down the warm, wet sensation as one of the girls vomited down her back.

the street, playfully prodding him with her sign. Minnie liked men who could

By the time Greg returned, the terrace had thinned out and Minnie was making her laugh. She was instantly drawn to Greg’s sarcastic manner and his sitting on the floor by the railings waiting for him.

angular features. He had a neatly trimmed brown beard and distinctive, dark-

‘What are you wearing? Where’s your top?’ asked Greg. Minnie had folded her rimmed glasses. Once they started dating, Minnie discovered that it wasn’t just her sodden shirt into her bag and was now only wearing a grey vest top with

for work that Greg liked to make up headlines – he enjoyed captioning her frayed spaghetti straps.

everything she did. When Minnie tripped on a step he would say, ‘Stunner trips

‘Someone was sick on my shirt,’ she said, hugging her arms around herself.

on stairs – Stairs seek legal advice; chances are they’re going down!’ Or when

‘Oh dear. Well, it’s a bit X-rated like that.’ Greg cupped a hand in front of she took the last banana in his fruit bowl, he’d pipe up in an American drawl,

his mouth to make a pretend microphone. ‘Weather report in – there’s a storm in

‘Fruit bowl homicide still unsolved – Did victim go bananas? Cross the lime? Or a D-cup presenting itself.’

was it simply a case of sour grapes?’ Puns were his thing. Greg wasn’t making

‘Well, it’s this or vomit-couture,’ Minnie said, pulling up her top self-any jokes this evening.

consciously. She’d never dream of wearing an outfit this revealing in public. She felt very exposed. ‘Did you find the party or not?’

Greg nodded. He led her back through the club, up another staircase and then

‘OK, well, if an asteroid lands in your absence. I can only say goodbye, I through a double door covered in red velvet, pillared by two bald security told you so, and Happy New Year,’ Minnie replied, trying to sound upbeat. guards.

As Greg walked away, Minnie turned to look out at the London skyline and

‘I was here just a minute ago – we’re here for the birthday party,’ Greg

shivered. The city exuded a sense of serenity in sharp contrast to the atmosphere explained. The security guard waved them through, glancing at Minnie's chest of the club. The buildings were bathed in silver moonlight and the night sky was as she walked past. Minnie folded her arms in front of her.

still and cloudless. Minnie wished she could transport herself to the top of

The party on the other side of the red velvet door was everything that the

another empty skyscraper just to lie down on the flat roof and gaze up at the

room they had come from was not: the music was at a normal volume, the crowd

another empty skyscraper just to lie down on the flat roof and gaze up at the room they had come from was not: the music was at a normal volume, the crowd

stars, unfettered by other people.

looked beautifully dressed and sophisticated, waiters were topping up

'Ten, nine, eight ... ' People were starting the countdown. 'Seven, six, five

champagne and nobody was being sick over anyone. The exterior curved wall of

... ' Minnie looked at all the couples pulling together in anticipation of the

the room was floor-to-ceiling glass, giving an incredible 180-degree view of the midnight kiss. She was glad Greg wasn't there to kiss her. She never understood city of London beyond. Minnie immediately felt intimidated. This was a rich why the end of the year had to be marked with the ridiculous convention of

persons' party, a black tie one at that – she couldn't look more out of place.

everyone locking lips in unison. People behaving like lemmings, following the

Minnie had cooked for enough rich people to know how they reacted to people

herd. 'Four, three, two, one, HAPPY NEW YEAR!'

like her; they would patronise her, or worse, look right through her. If she had An explosion of fireworks erupted in the sky, illuminating the city beneath in been wearing the right armour she could have done a good impression of someone who didn't care, but her skimpy vest top was not it.

'Greg! You didn't tell me it was black tie?' she hissed.

'Black tie is a bourgeois construct, Minnie. I wouldn't wear it to my own

funeral.' Greg scanned the room and then waved to a tall blonde girl in a tight On the balcony of the club, the fireworks cast ugly shadows red dress. 'Lucy!' The girl turned, gave a smile of recognition, then started making her way through the crowd towards them. 'Better late than never, hey,'

Greg said, reaching out to touch her arm. 'This is Minnie. Someone was sick on

her shirt on the way in.'

'Hi,' said Lucy. Her pillowy lips closed over perfect straight teeth into a

'Happy Birthday to me,' Minnie said quietly to herself. Then she felt a sympathetic smile. 'Sorry about the sick. It's ridiculous they make you wade

warm, wet sensation as one of the girls vomited down her back.

through all the plebs to get up to the VIP suite.'

By the time Greg returned, the terrace had thinned out and Minnie was

Minnie shook her head, shrugging it off.

sitting on the floor by the railings waiting for him.

‘Quite a party,’ she said, looking around at all the free-flowing booze. How

‘What are you wearing? Where’s your top?’ asked Greg. Minnie had folded much would a party like this cost?

her sodden shirt into her bag and was now only wearing a grey vest top with

‘It’s my boyfriend’s birthday on the first. We thought we’d use it as an frayed spaghetti straps.

excuse to throw an excessive New Year’s Eve bash,’ Lucy said with a flick of

‘Someone was sick on my shirt,’ she said, hugging her arms around herself. her hand. Then she turned to Minnie with a beaming smile, ‘Hey, didn’t Greg

‘Oh dear. Well, it’s a bit X-rated like that.’ Greg cupped a hand in front of say you were a first of January baby too, Minnie?’

his mouth to make a pretend microphone. ‘Weather report in – there’s a storm in

‘Oh, Happy Birthday,’ Greg said hurriedly. Lucy turned to look at him wide-

a D-cup presenting itself.’

eyed.

‘Well, it’s this or vomit-couture,’ Minnie said, pulling up her top self-

‘Greg, you didn’t even say Happy Birthday to her yet? Dump him, Minnie!’

consciously. She'd never dream of wearing an outfit this revealing in public. She Lucy laughed and nudged Greg in the ribs. Greg blushed and looked at his feet.

felt very exposed. 'Did you find the party or not?'

'I'm not big on birthdays,' Minnie smiled weakly.

Greg nodded. He led her back through the club, up another staircase and then

They stood in silence for a moment.

through a double door covered in red velvet, pillared by two bald security

'So, um, Lucy is the food columnist at the paper,' Greg said. 'I'm queuing up

guards.

for a jammy gig like that. I saw you were at La Petite Assiette Rouge last week.

So bloody jealous, Luce.'

'It has its downsides, darling. I'm getting fatter and fatter the amount of

Michelin-star dinners I'm being forced to eat. I feel like a foie gras goose being The party on the other side of the red velvet door was everything that the

stuffed to bursting,' said Lucy.

room they had come from was not: the music was at a normal volume, the crowd

Minnie glanced down at Lucy's svelte, gym-toned figure in the skin-tight

room they had come from was not: the music was at a normal volume, the crowd Minnie glanced down at Lucy's svelte, gym-toned figure in the skin-tight

looked beautifully dressed and sophisticated, waiters were topping up

look-how-thin-I-am dress.

champagne and nobody was being sick over anyone. The exterior curved wall of

'Oh diddums, such a hardship,' said Greg, nudging his elbow into hers.

the room was floor-to-ceiling glass, giving an incredible 180-degree view of the 'Smart, beautiful girl force-fed fine food – Human rights campaigners on city of London beyond. Minnie immediately felt intimidated. This was a rich

standby!'

persons' party, a black tie one at that – she couldn't look more out of place.

Lucy threw her head back and gave a half-snorting, half-silent laugh, then

Minnie had cooked for enough rich people to know how they reacted to people

she clutched Greg's arm, as though she might fall over.

like her; they would patronise her, or worse, look right through her. If she had

'You must have an absolute hoot with this one, Minnie.'

been wearing the right armour she could have done a good impression of

Minnie nodded, though she wondered if Greg's hilarious newspaper

someone who didn't care, but her skimpy vest top was not it.

headlines might be starting to get annoying.

‘Greg! You didn’t tell me it was black tie?’ she hissed.

‘Mins is in the food world too,’ said Greg, standing a little taller. ‘Runs her

‘Black tie is a bourgeois construct, Minnie. I wouldn’t wear it to my own
own catering business in the charity sector.’

funeral.’ Greg scanned the room and then waved to a tall blonde girl in a
tight

‘That sounds interesting,’ said Lucy, looking over Minnie’s shoulder and
red dress. ‘Lucy!’ The girl turned, gave a smile of recognition, then started
waving to someone behind her.

making her way through the crowd towards them. ‘Better late than never,
hey,’

‘I don’t think making pies for the elderly counts as being in the “food

Greg said, reaching out to touch her arm. ‘This is Minnie. Someone was
sick on world”, but thanks for bigging me up, hun,’ Minnie said, rubbing
Greg’s back.

her shirt on the way in.’

‘Do you cater events? Maybe I’ve come across you?’ asked Lucy, turning
her attention back to Minnie.

‘No, we just do pies for the elderly. The company’s called No Hard Fillings,
it’s a bit like Meals on Wheels.’

Minnie shook her head, shrugging it off.

Lucy blinked her eyes a few times.

‘Quite a party,’ she said, looking around at all the free-flowing booze. How

‘No hard feelings?’ she said.

much would a party like this cost?

‘No,’ said Minnie, ‘No Hard *Fillings*, as in pie fillings. It’s um, supposed to

‘It’s my boyfriend’s birthday on the first. We thought we’d use it as an

be funny.’

excuse to throw an excessive New Year’s Eve bash,’ Lucy said with a flick of

‘Oh, I see. Ha-ha,’ Lucy said, wrinkling her nose and giving another silent

her hand. Then she turned to Minnie with a beaming smile, ‘Hey, didn’t Greg

laugh. ‘Well that must be very ... fulfilling.’

say you were a first of January baby too, Minnie?’

Greg let out a snorting cackle. ‘Good one Luce,’ he tapped his elbow to

‘Oh, Happy Birthday,’ Greg said hurriedly. Lucy turned to look at him wide- Lucy’s. ‘See, the thing is, Minnie’s company would be a lot more successful if eyed.

she didn’t keep giving stuff away for free and employing a load of time bandits

‘Greg, you didn’t even say Happy Birthday to her yet? Dump him, Minnie!’ with zero work ethic.’

Lucy laughed and nudged Greg in the ribs. Greg blushed and looked at his feet.

‘I don’t, and that’s not true,’ Minnie said, bowing her head.

‘I’m not big on birthdays,’ Minnie smiled weakly.

‘Well, it sounds jolly rewarding,’ said Lucy. ‘I find old people so sweet,

They stood in silence for a moment.

don’t you?’

‘So, um, Lucy is the food columnist at the paper,’ Greg said. ‘I’m queuing up

‘Some of them are sweet, some of them are total knobs, same as the rest of

for a jammy gig like that. I saw you were at La Petite Assiette Rouge last week. us,’ said Minnie. Greg coughed loudly and Minnie gave him a firm pat on the So bloody jealous, Luce.’

back.

‘It has its downsides, darling. I’m getting fatter and fatter the amount of

‘But you’re planning to branch out, aren’t you Min?’ Greg said, recovering

Michelin-star dinners I’m being forced to eat. I feel like a foie gras goose being his composure. ‘That’s her current customer base, but she could easily expand; stuffed to bursting,’ said Lucy.

do weddings, corporates, high-calibre events, all sorts. Maybe Lucy could hook

Minnie glanced down at Lucy’s svelte, gym-toned figure in the skin-tight
you up with some contacts?’

‘Sure, sure, happy to help,’ Lucy said, waving at someone across the room

Minnie glanced down at Lucy’s svelte, gym-toned figure in the skin-tight look-how-thin-I-am dress.

‘Sure, sure, happy to help,’ Lucy said, waving at someone across the room

‘Oh diddums, such a hardship,’ said Greg, nudging his elbow into hers.

and starting to move away. ‘Listen, I must go mingle. Make yourselves at home;

‘Smart, beautiful girl force-fed fine food – Human rights campaigners on drink our champagne – we ordered way too much. And don’t worry about standby!’

arriving late, the party’s hardly started.’

Lucy cocked her head and flashed them both a well-rehearsed hostess smile,

then with a swish of long silky hair she turned to go. Minnie watched Greg’s

‘You must have an absolute hoot with this one, Minnie.’

eyes follow her across the room.

Minnie nodded, though she wondered if Greg’s hilarious newspaper

Seeing them standing empty-handed, a waiter came over to offer them headlines might be starting to get annoying.

champagne. They both took one and went to clink glasses but missed, Greg’s

‘Mins is in the food world too,’ said Greg, standing a little taller. ‘Runs her champagne flute bumping into Minnie’s wrist. He quickly retracted his hand and

own catering business in the charity sector.’

took a large swig of drink.

‘That sounds interesting,’ said Lucy, looking over Minnie’s shoulder and

‘Happy New Year,’ said Minnie.

waving to someone behind her.

‘Happy New Year,’ said Greg, then after a pause, ‘and Happy, er, Birthday.

‘I don’t think making pies for the elderly counts as being in the “food

I, um, I have a present for you back at my flat. Sorry, I didn’t have a chance to world”, but thanks for bigging me up, hun,’ Minnie said, rubbing Greg’s back.

wrap it.’

‘Do you cater events? Maybe I’ve come across you?’ asked Lucy, turning

‘Don’t worry. I said not to get me anything.’

her attention back to Minnie.

Greg shuffled his weight between each foot, his eyes flitting around the

‘No, we just do pies for the elderly. The company’s called No Hard Fillings, room.

it’s a bit like Meals on Wheels.’

‘She’s a useful person to know, Lucy Donohue, I told you it would be worth

Lucy blinked her eyes a few times.

coming tonight. She knows everyone who's anyone in your sector. You should

'No hard feelings?' she said.

never underestimate how far good contacts will get you in life, Minnie.'

'I doubt she knows everyone who's anyone in the pie sector,' Minnie said, then, affecting a posh voice, 'unless it's pastry chefs making choux pie-ettes out

'Oh, I see. Ha-ha,' Lucy said, wrinkling her nose and giving another silent of foie gras at la petite rue de la frenchy french.' She stuck out her tongue and laugh. 'Well that must be very ... fulfilling.'

then laughed.

Greg let out a snorting cackle. 'Good one Luce,' he tapped his elbow to

'I don't know why you always do that,' Greg said. 'I'm trying to help you.'

Lucy's. 'See, the thing is, Minnie's company would be a lot more successful if

'You're right, I'm sorry,' said Minnie, feeling chastised. She didn't need she didn't keep giving stuff away for free and employing a load of time bandits Greg to point it out. She could always hear herself sounding bitchy when she felt with zero work ethic.'

insecure and ultimately it only made her feel worse. She bit her lip and fiddled with the pendant on her necklace. Greg pouted, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

'Well, it sounds jolly rewarding,' said Lucy. 'I find old people so sweet,

‘Well, you appear to have made it to midnight without turning into a don’t you?’

pumpkin, or whatever it is you were worried about.’

‘Some of them are sweet, some of them are total knobs, same as the rest of

‘The jinx doesn’t end at midnight, it’s the whole of New Year’s Eve night us,’ said Minnie. Greg coughed loudly and Minnie gave him a firm pat on the

and New Year’s Day. And I’m not worried about “turning into a pumpkin” – it’s

back.

the little stuff like getting puked on or losing my coat on the bus on the way

‘But you’re planning to branch out, aren’t you Min?’ Greg said, recovering here. I’m just unlucky around New Year.’

his composure. ‘That’s her current customer base, but she could easily expand;

‘Well, someone spilt beer on my shoes, and I missed most of my friend’s

do weddings, corporates, high-calibre events, all sorts. Maybe Lucy could hook party because I was stuck at your eccentric friend’s house. Maybe I’m jinxed you up with some contacts?’

too?’ Greg finished the sentence with an overly animated smile, a smile that

‘Sure, sure, happy to help,’ Lucy said, waving at someone across the room

‘Sure, sure, happy to help,’ Lucy said, waving at someone across the room said, ‘I’m joking so you can’t get offended.’ His eyes dropped down to

Minnie's and starting to move away. 'Listen, I must go mingle. Make yourselves at home; chest.

drink our champagne – we ordered way too much. And don't worry about

'Is the vest top really obscene?' she asked with a wince.

arriving late, the party's hardly started.'

'Well, you know I love that view, Min, but maybe the rest of the room would

Lucy cocked her head and flashed them both a well-rehearsed hostess smile, rather look at something else,' Greg nodded.

then with a swish of long silky hair she turned to go. Minnie watched Greg's

'Right, I'll go to the bathroom and try to salvage my shirt.'

eyes follow her across the room.

On the way to the bathroom, Minnie checked her phone. She had a text from

Seeing them standing empty-handed, a waiter came over to offer them Leila.

champagne. They both took one and went to clink glasses but missed, Greg's

'Just checking on you. What's the damage? Do I need to rescue you from a champagne flute bumping into Minnie's wrist. He quickly retracted his hand and hostage situation/pothole/worse?'

took a large swig of drink.

Minnie smiled and tapped out a reply, ‘Not too bad so far. Lost only coat and

‘Happy New Year,’ said Minnie.

got vommed on.;)’

‘Happy New Year,’ said Greg, then after a pause, ‘and Happy, er, Birthday.

Leila was Minnie’s best friend and business partner. They’d set up No Hard

I, um, I have a present for you back at my flat. Sorry, I didn’t have a chance to Fillings together four years ago and invested all their time, money and energy

wrap it.’

into it ever since. If it hadn’t been for Leila, Minnie doubted she could have kept it going for as long as they had. They’d faced so many hurdles along the way, it Greg shuffled his weight between each foot, his eyes flitting around the

would have been so easy just to give up and go back to working for someone

room.

else, somewhere you knew you’d be getting a pay cheque at the end of each

‘She’s a useful person to know, Lucy Donohue, I told you it would be worth month rather than scrabbling to balance the books and give yourself any kind of coming tonight. She knows everyone who’s anyone in your sector. You should

salary.

never underestimate how far good contacts will get you in life, Minnie.’

‘So surprise – I’ve spent New Year’s Eve preparing pies so we don’t have to

‘I doubt she knows everyone who’s anyone in the pie sector,’ Minnie said, work tomorrow. I’m taking you somewhere for your birthday. You need to wear

then, affecting a posh voice, ‘unless it’s pastry chefs making choux pie-ettes out a dress,’ said Leila’s text.

of foie gras at la petite rue de la frenchy french.’ She stuck out her tongue and Minnie smiled. She sent back a dress and sick face emoji.

then laughed.

Leila sent back a screen full of pie emojis and then a screen full of sick faces.

‘I don’t know why you always do that,’ Greg said. ‘I’m trying to help you.’ Minnie laughed out loud and then replied, ‘You are the best. Thank you Pieface.

‘You’re right, I’m sorry,’ said Minnie, feeling chastised. She didn’t need For you, and only you, I will wear a dress xxx.’

Greg to point it out. She could always hear herself sounding bitchy when she felt Minnie looked up from her phone and walked straight into a waiter carrying

insecure and ultimately it only made her feel worse. She bit her lip and fiddled a tray of canapés. A flurry of goat’s-cheese tartlets rained down on her.

with the pendant on her necklace. Greg pouted, a muscle twitching in his jaw.

‘Oh god, I’m so sorry,’ she said, falling down onto her hands and knees to

‘Well, you appear to have made it to midnight without turning into a

help the waiter retrieve the debris.

pumpkin, or whatever it is you were worried about.’

‘It’s not my night,’ said the waiter, miserably.

‘The jinx doesn’t end at midnight, it’s the whole of New Year’s Eve night

He couldn’t have been more than seventeen. Minnie saw that his glasses had

and New Year’s Day. And I’m not worried about “turning into a pumpkin” – it’s been spattered with soft cheese. She gently took them from his nose and wiped the little stuff like getting puked on or losing my coat on the bus on the way

them on her top before returning them.

here. I’m just unlucky around New Year.’

‘I know the feeling,’ she said.

Once she’d helped the waiter clean up as best she could, Minnie walked

around the back of the bar and found the toilets along a dimly lit corridor. She peered around the door of the ladies’ loos. Half a dozen women were chatting at the mirrors, touching up their make-up. She didn’t want to wash her vomity shirt

said, ‘I’m joking so you can’t get offended.’ His eyes dropped down to Minnie’s the mirrors, touching up their make-up. She didn’t want to wash her vomity shirt in front of them. Walking further down the corridor she found a unisex disabled

‘Is the vest top really obscene?’ she asked with a wince.

toilet with its own sink and hand dryer – perfect. She pulled the black silk shirt

‘Well, you know I love that view, Min, but maybe the rest of the room would’ve come out of her bag and started rinsing off the worst of it. Luckily, it was mainly rather look at something else,’ Greg nodded.

sticky rather than anything too globular, but the smell of stomach bile mixed

‘Right, I’ll go to the bathroom and try to salvage my shirt.’

with vodka and Coke made Minnie pinch in her nostrils. She couldn’t imagine

On the way to the bathroom, Minnie checked her phone. She had a text from Lucy Donohue ever finding herself in this situation.

Leila.

She looked up at herself in the mirror, instinctively pushing her curls back

‘Just checking on you. What’s the damage? Do I need to rescue you from a behind her ears. Her hair disobediently sprang back the moment she let go. hostage situation/pothole/worse?’

She’d just had it cut and the hairdresser had gone an inch shorter than she’d

Minnie smiled and tapped out a reply, ‘Not too bad so far. Lost only coat and asked for. Now she couldn’t tie it up or keep it out of her eyes. She drew the got vommed on.;)’

back of a finger beneath each eye to remove some smudged eyeliner, then

Leila was Minnie’s best friend and business partner. They’d set up No Hard reapplied the plum lipstick Leila had given her as an early birthday present. She Fillings together four years ago and invested all their time, money and energy

would never have chosen something so bold for herself, but it complemented her

into it ever since. If it hadn't been for Leila, Minnie doubted she could have kept skin tone, and she wondered that sometimes Leila knew what suited her better it going for as long as they had. They'd faced so many hurdles along the way, it than she knew herself.

would have been so easy just to give up and go back to working for someone

Minnie dried her shirt under the hand dryer as best she could, and then put it

else, somewhere you knew you'd be getting a pay cheque at the end of each back on. She stood for a moment, staring at her reflection wearing the damp,

month rather than scrabbling to balance the books and give yourself any kind of creased, misshapen shirt. It was the nicest item of clothing Minnie owned; a salary.

fitted black silk blouse with white scallop cuffs. It was an expensive brand she

'So surprise – I've spent New Year's Eve preparing pies so we don't have to had found in a charity shop. She'd been so pleased when she'd found it. Now it work tomorrow. I'm taking you somewhere for your birthday. You need to wear was as though even the shirt knew her to be an imposter and was wrinkling itself a dress,' said Leila's text.

up in protest.

Minnie smiled. She sent back a dress and sick face emoji.

'Come on,' she said firmly, motivating herself to go back out to the party.

Leila sent back a screen full of pie emojis and then a screen full of sick faces.

Minnie exhaled slowly. She needed to stop being a killjoy. Greg wanted to be here and she wanted to be with Greg. Maybe her bad luck was over with, for this New Year anyway.

Minnie looked up from her phone and walked straight into a waiter carrying

Minnie went to open the door, but as she pushed the handle down it came

a tray of canapés. A flurry of goat's-cheese tartlets rained down on her.

away in her hand. She tried the door again – it wouldn't open. She tried

'Oh god, I'm so sorry,' she said, falling down onto her hands and knees to reattaching the handle, but it wouldn't go on.

help the waiter retrieve the debris.

She banged on the door with both hands. 'Hello! Can someone help? I can't

'It's not my night,' said the waiter, miserably.

open the door!' At that moment the music outside notched up a level. It sounded He couldn't have been more than seventeen. Minnie saw that his glasses had like a live band had started playing and there were whoops and shrieks from the been spattered with soft cheese. She gently took them from his nose and wiped

party. No one was going to hear her now. She would just have to wait until Greg them on her top before returning them.

came to find her.

‘I know the feeling,’ she said.

Minnie sank down to the floor and looked up at the ceiling. The whole room

Once she’d helped the waiter clean up as best she could, Minnie walked
was decorated with dark blue wallpaper, imprinted with tiny silver

around the back of the bar and found the toilets along a dimly lit corridor.
She constellations. Well, she had got her wish; she was now alone, staring
up at the peered around the door of the ladies’ loos. Half a dozen women
were chatting at stars. She pulled out her phone to text Greg – the screen
was dead.

the mirrors, touching up their make-up. She didn’t want to wash her vomity
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‘Of course it is,’ Minnie said, shaking her head with a little laugh. If she

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disabled could say something for this New Year’s jinx, it certainly had a
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Lucy Donohue ever finding herself in this situation.

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Minnie dried her shirt under the hand dryer as best she could, and then put it

back on. She stood for a moment, staring at her reflection wearing the damp,

creased, misshapen shirt. It was the nicest item of clothing Minnie owned; a

fitted black silk blouse with white scallop cuffs. It was an expensive brand she had found in a charity shop. She'd been so pleased when she'd found it. Now it

was as though even the shirt knew her to be an imposter and was wrinkling itself up in protest.

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Minnie went to open the door, but as she pushed the handle down it came

away in her hand. She tried the door again – it wouldn't open. She tried

reattaching the handle, but it wouldn't go on.

party. No one was going to hear her now. She would just have to wait until Greg Minnie sank down to the floor and looked up at the ceiling. The whole room

was decorated with dark blue wallpaper, imprinted with tiny silver constellations. Well, she had got her wish; she was now alone, staring up at the stars. She pulled out her phone to text Greg – the screen was dead.

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‘Of course it is,’ Minnie said, shaking her head with a little laugh. If she could say something for this New Year’s jinx, it certainly had a sense of humour.

New Year’s Day 2020

Minnie woke up feeling disorientated, her throat painfully dry. She remembered banging on the door for hours, but then she must have fallen asleep.

She had no concept of what time it was. It was quiet outside, the music no longer playing. She got to her feet, rubbing at the crick in her neck.

‘Hello, hello! Can someone let me out?’ she called.

What if everyone had gone home and the place was shut for the night? She’d

read stories about this kind of thing; people being stuck in toilets for days before they were rescued, people who drank cistern water to survive and wove blankets

out of toilet roll to keep warm. How long would she have to be trapped before

she resorted to eating the soap? She banged on the door again, this time with

more urgency.

‘Help! Help me!’

‘Hello?’ came a man’s voice.

‘Yes, hello! Oh, thank god. The door handle is broken, I can’t get out,’ she called through the door.

‘How long have you been in there?’ said the voice, rattling the handle from the other side.

‘Long enough,’ Minnie said.

‘OK, hold on, I’ll go find someone,’ said the voice. She heard footsteps walking away. She couldn’t believe Greg hadn’t come to find her. Had he gone

home without her? Three or four minutes later the voice returned.

‘OK, I’m back. I have Luis here. He’s got a thousand keys in his hand.’

‘I don’t know how this happened,’ came another voice, an older man. Minnie

heard keys being rattled in the lock.

‘Here, let me try,’ said the first voice. More clinking of keys and then the door swung open. ‘Look at that, first key and I nailed it. What are the chances?’

Minnie squinted into the light of the corridor. The voice belonged to a tall, broad-shouldered man with sandy-coloured hair and distinctive eyebrows a shade darker than the hair on his head. He grinned at Minnie, a warm, guileless smile. He was dressed in formal black trousers and a crisp white shirt. A black bow tie hung undone around his open collar, revealing a glimpse of tanned skin.

Next to him stood a short, rotund bald man with a blank expression.

‘What time is it?’ Minnie asked, looking between the two men.

‘What time is it?’ Minnie asked, looking between the two men.

‘Seven forty-five,’ said the man in black tie.

‘I go now,’ said the shorter man, taking back the huge pile of keys and plodding off down the corridor muttering to himself.

‘A man of very few words,’ said the man in black tie.

Minnie followed him along the corridor back to the main room. The place was empty. Tendrils of party popper paper hung from the light fittings, and an

Minnie woke up feeling disorientated, her throat painfully dry. She army of half-empty champagne flutes lined the bar.

remembered banging on the door for hours, but then she must have fallen asleep.

‘Am I the only one left? I can’t believe I slept that long.’

She had no concept of what time it was. It was quiet outside, the music no longer

‘Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met,’ he said, holding out his hand for Minnie to playing. She got to her feet, rubbing at the crick in her neck. shake.

‘Hello, hello! Can someone let me out?’ she called.

‘Oh right, I’m Minnie.’ The man smiled at her, but looked as though he was

What if everyone had gone home and the place was shut for the night?

She’d waiting for more. ‘Greg’s girlfriend. He works with Lucy. She invited us.’

read stories about this kind of thing; people being stuck in toilets for days before

‘Oh sure, everyone’s welcome. I think I heard Luce mention a Greg. Funny

they were rescued, people who drank cistern water to survive and wove blankets Greg, right?’

out of toilet roll to keep warm. How long would she have to be trapped before

‘Funny Greg,’ Minnie raised an eyebrow, amused Greg would be called that.

she resorted to eating the soap? She banged on the door again, this time with

The man reached his arms above his head and the stretch turned into an more urgency.

enormous yawn. ‘Sorry, it’s catching up with me. What a great night, though.’

‘Help! Help me!’

‘Not for me,’ Minnie said wryly.

‘Hello?’ came a man’s voice.

‘No, not for you.’ The man gave an exaggerated grimace at having said the

‘Yes, hello! Oh, thank god. The door handle is broken, I can’t get out,’ she

wrong thing and Minnie couldn't help smiling.

called through the door.

'So, I'm assuming it was your party then, Lucy's boyfriend, right? Thank

'How long have you been in there?' said the voice, rattling the handle from you for having me, I guess,' Minnie said, clasping her hands behind her back.

the other side.

'You're more than welcome. In theory it was my party, Lucy invited

'Long enough,' Minnie said.

everyone.'

'OK, hold on, I'll go find someone,' said the voice. She heard footsteps

As he was speaking, the man's phone began to ring in his pocket. He

walking away. She couldn't believe Greg hadn't come to find her. Had he gone frowned briefly as he pulled it out to look at the screen. 'Will you excuse me for home without her? Three or four minutes later the voice returned.

one minute, I'm sorry, I have to get this, Minnie.'

'Sure, no problem,' Minnie shrugged.

'I don't know how this happened,' came another voice, an older man. Minnie

He turned his back and walked a few paces away from her.

heard keys being rattled in the lock.

'Hi,' he said. 'Are you OK? No, I'm still out ... I'll come around later ... I

‘Here, let me try,’ said the first voice. More clinking of keys and then the checked all the locks last night before I left ... No ... OK.’ Minnie could see the door swung open. ‘Look at that, first key and I nailed it. What are the chances?’ profile of his face. He had closed his eyes while he was talking. ‘Fine, I’ll come Minnie squinted into the light of the corridor. The voice belonged to a tall,

and check, just give me a few hours, *please*.’

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Minnie watched him hang up the call. He noticed her watching him and gave

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‘Is everything all right?’ she asked.

bow tie hung undone around his open collar, revealing a glimpse of tanned skin.

‘Yes, sorry about that,’ he shook his head. He walked across the rest of the

Next to him stood a short, rotund bald man with a blank expression.

room towards the huge glass windows.

‘What time is it?’ Minnie asked, looking between the two men.

‘So, how come you’re the only one still here?’ Minnie asked.

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He turned to look at her for a moment, assessing her. Then he said, ‘It

‘I go now,’ said the shorter man, taking back the huge pile of keys and

probably sounds cheesy, but I always try to see the first sunrise of the year. I plodding off down the corridor muttering to himself.

thought if I left with the others, I’d be in a cab somewhere and I’d miss it.’
He

‘A man of very few words,’ said the man in black tie.

held out his arms towards the windows. ‘Is there anywhere you’d rather watch

Minnie followed him along the corridor back to the main room. The place
the first sunrise of the year from?’

was empty. Tendrils of party popper paper hung from the light fittings, and an

‘Plenty of places,’ said Minnie. ‘The desert, a beautiful mountain top, on a
army of half-empty champagne flutes lined the bar.

TV screen from the comfort of my bed. Ideally pre-recorded so I didn’t
have to

‘Am I the only one left? I can’t believe I slept that long.’
get up so early.’

‘Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met,’ he said, holding out his hand for Minnie to
The man tilted his head to one side, his eyes creasing with amusement, the

shake.

stressed look gone.

‘Well, you’re awake now, no pre-record required. Come on, come over here.’

‘Oh sure, everyone’s welcome. I think I heard Luce mention a Greg. Funny

Minnie walked over to the window and pressed a hand against the glass.
The

Greg, right?’

light was beginning to creep over the horizon. A high layer of cloud glowed
a

‘Funny Greg,’ Minnie raised an eyebrow, amused Greg would be called that. deep rusty pink, creating an aura of warmth over an otherwise cold, grey city.

The man reached his arms above his head and the stretch turned into an

Skyscrapers stood silhouetted against the sky, their sharp straight lines in stark enormous yawn. ‘Sorry, it’s catching up with me. What a great night, though.’

contrast to the softness of the clouds above.

‘Not for me,’ Minnie said wryly.

‘Pretty impressive,’ Minnie said. ‘I can’t think when I was last awake for a

‘No, not for you.’ The man gave an exaggerated grimace at having said the sunrise.’

wrong thing and Minnie couldn’t help smiling.

‘This is my favourite day of the year,’ he said. ‘A chance to start everything

‘So, I’m assuming it was your party then, Lucy’s boyfriend, right? Thank
anew, don’t you think?’

you for having me, I guess,’ Minnie said, clasping her hands behind her
back.

‘Funny, it’s my least favourite day of the year,’ said Minnie. ‘I hate it.’

‘You’re more than welcome. In theory it was my party, Lucy invited

‘You can’t hate it, it’s my birthday. I won’t let you hate it,’ he said, his tired
everyone.’

greyish-blue eyes temporarily revived, dancing with energy.

As he was speaking, the man’s phone began to ring in his pocket. He

Minnie turned to look at him, she blinked slowly.

frowned briefly as he pulled it out to look at the screen. ‘Will you excuse
me for

‘It’s my birthday too,’ she said.

one minute, I’m sorry, I have to get this, Minnie.’

‘It is not.’

‘Sure, no problem,’ Minnie shrugged.

‘I’m not joking. I promise you it is.’

He turned his back and walked a few paces away from her.

He squinted at her, his chin retracting towards his neck, a look of
scepticism.

He turned back to the window just as the whole sky began to glow red.

‘Will you look at that?’ he said. ‘Glorious.’

Minnie glanced sideways at him as he looked out at the morning sky. She couldn’t pinpoint one feature that stood out, but there was a sort of synergy

Minnie watched him hang up the call. He noticed her watching him and gave about his face; everything came together and just worked. He seemed so comfortable in his own skin, something Minnie had rarely experienced. He

‘Is everything all right?’ she asked.

looked over and saw her staring at him and she quickly turned her attention back

‘Yes, sorry about that,’ he shook his head. He walked across the rest of the to the other view.

room towards the huge glass windows.

‘You know, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone with the same birthday as

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‘So, how come you’re the only one still here?’ Minnie asked.

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He turned to look at her for a moment, assessing her. Then he said, ‘It

‘It’s a very elite club. I’ll make you a membership card.’ Minnie paused,

probably sounds cheesy, but I always try to see the first sunrise of the year. I nervous for some reason. 'Look, I'm sorry, I know I should know your name

thought if I left with the others, I'd be in a cab somewhere and I'd miss it.' He since I'm at your party, but I came with Greg and he didn't say. I guess I'll need held out his arms towards the windows. 'Is there anywhere you'd rather watch

to know it if I'm going to make you a membership card.'

the first sunrise of the year from?'

'Sorry, I'm Quinn,' he replied.

'Plenty of places,' said Minnie. 'The desert, a beautiful mountain top, on a

'Quinn?' Minnie's mouth fell open. 'Quinn Hamilton?'

TV screen from the comfort of my bed. Ideally pre-recorded so I didn't have to

'Yes, Quinn Hamilton.'

get up so early.'

'Quinn Hamilton, born at Hampstead Hospital in 1990?'

The man tilted his head to one side, his eyes creasing with amusement, the

'Yes,' said Quinn, his brow furrowing in confusion.

stressed look gone.

'You,' Minnie said, clenching her teeth. 'You stole my name.'

'Well, you're awake now, no pre-record required. Come on, come over here.'

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The

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‘Pretty impressive,’ Minnie said. ‘I can’t think when I was last awake for a
sunrise.’

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‘You can’t hate it, it’s my birthday. I won’t let you hate it,’ he said, his tired
greyish-blue eyes temporarily revived, dancing with energy.

Minnie turned to look at him, she blinked slowly.

‘It’s my birthday too,’ she said.

‘It is not.’

‘I’m not joking. I promise you it is.’

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couldn’t pinpoint one feature that stood out, but there was a sort of synergy

about his face; everything came together and just worked. He seemed so comfortable in his own skin, something Minnie had rarely experienced. He looked over and saw her staring at him and she quickly turned her attention back to the other view.

‘You know, I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone with the same birthday as me,’ he said.

me,’ he said.

‘It’s a very elite club. I’ll make you a membership card.’ Minnie paused, nervous for some reason. ‘Look, I’m sorry, I know I should know your name

since I’m at your party, but I came with Greg and he didn’t say. I guess I’ll need to know it if I’m going to make you a membership card.’

‘Sorry, I’m Quinn,’ he replied.

‘Quinn?’ Minnie’s mouth fell open. ‘Quinn Hamilton?’

‘Yes, Quinn Hamilton.’

‘Quinn Hamilton, born at Hampstead Hospital in 1990?’

‘Yes,’ said Quinn, his brow furrowing in confusion.

‘You,’ Minnie said, clenching her teeth. ‘You stole my name.’

New Year’s Eve 1989

Connie Cooper lay in the hospital bed looking over at the woman in the bed next to her. Specifically she was looking at the woman’s legs, which were long, glossy and as smooth as a Barbie doll’s. How was that even possible

at this

stage? Connie looked down at her own short, stumpy legs, covered in half an

inch of black hair. She probably should have shaved her legs before coming in –

well, at least the bits she could still reach.

Connie watched as the other woman dabbed her forehead with a lacy cream handkerchief. Connie's hair and hospital gown were soaked with sweat; using a

handkerchief would be like trying to dry off the decks of the Titanic with a kitchen roll. The other woman's shiny blonde hair was tied back with a delicate yellow ribbon – a ribbon! Who even owned ribbon? Connie's own dark wiry

nest was pulled back with one of the elastic bands Bill used to keep his tools

together. There was one feature that Connie did have in common with the woman in the bed next to her – they both had enormous round bellies protruding

beneath their hospital gowns.

‘It's like the overflow car park or something in here; the whole of north London must be giving birth tonight,’ said Connie. The other woman didn't respond. She looked pained and exhausted. ‘Are you crossing your legs till midnight then?’

‘No,’ said the woman wearily. ‘I want this baby out, I’ve been in labour for two days but the contractions keep stopping and starting.’

‘I thought you might be holding out for the prize money,’ said Connie. ‘I’m Connie, by the way.’

‘Tara,’ said the blonde woman, but it came out ‘Ta ... raaa ... ’ as another contraction took hold. She started puffing out short little bleats of breath.

Connie was about to say something else but then had to pause to focus on a contraction of her own. She stood up and walked across the ward in her hospital gown, bending over one of the empty beds opposite until the pain had receded.

Then she turned back to Tara and said, ‘You’re doing it all wrong. Your breathing’s too shallow, you sound like a little sheep.’

‘A sheep?’ said Tara. She looked mortified.

‘Yeah, you want to breathe from your gut, sound like a cow, or better yet a hippo. Try and make a hippo noise.’

hippo. Try and make a hippo noise.’

‘I’m not going to make a hippo noise.’ Tara gave a sharp headshake.

‘Ridiculous.’

Connie shrugged. She started lunging back and forth on her front leg, while holding onto the end of the hospital bed.

‘You really never heard about the prize money for this nineties baby then?’